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Author(s): **Asma Atif**

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Lack of Awareness in Teachers about Learning Disabilities and its Effect on ESL Classroom Environment

Asma Atif^{1*}

Abstract

This paper is based on a study conducted to develop an insight into the problems that arise in an ESL classroom due to the lack of awareness in teachers about learning disabilities. It focuses on the importance of professional training for ESL teachers before they start teaching. The population of the research included primary school students, members of the administrative staff, ESL teachers of four primary level schools of Lahore and a number of diagnosed students suffering from one or more learning disabilities. The tools used for data collection included four questionnaire surveys designed specifically to cater the target population. The research concluded that teachers should have sufficient knowledge about learning disabilities. They should be given professional training and awareness about learning disabilities before they start teaching. Moreover, they should be able to identify disabled students and cater their special needs, so these students can enjoy a motivating learning experience. Some features that should be included in teachers' training are suggested at the end of this research.

Keywords: awareness, ESL classroom, learning disabilities, teachers

Introduction

A learning disability is said to be a neurological disorder which makes it difficult for the brain to perform the functions of receiving, processing, analyzing and storing information. A person with a learning disability commonly has problems, in learning and using certain skills. These skills include reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning and remembering skills. Learning disabilities are of different types and their symptoms sometimes vary from person to person, depending upon the kind of learning disability they are suffering from.

There are a number of learning disabilities associated with language learning. The most common among them include Dyslexia, Language Processing Disorder (LPD), Dysgraphia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Learning disabilities are a big problem for students these days. It is because of such disorders that the learners have to undergo an unhealthy and demotivating learning experience in a standard classroom environment. Such discouraging experiences

¹Kinnaird College for Women, Pakistan

*Corresponding author: asmiatifjanjua@gmail.com

prevent the students from availing the full range of educational opportunities very commonly available to other learners of their age/their peers. The major reason for their prolonged suffering is the lack of awareness in teachers about learning disabilities. Teachers are not properly trained to handle such students in an inclusive classroom environment. They neither can identify students suffering from a learning disability nor are they aware of any strategies to facilitate them. Thus, students suffering from learning disabilities are unable to enjoy a similar and an equal access to educational experiences enjoyed by their fellow learners.

The current study attempts to identify the level of awareness in teachers about learning disabilities and the effect it has on disabled students studying in an inclusive classroom environment. Moreover, it also highlights different problems faced by slow learners and the need of the appropriate training that should be provided to teachers in order to allow them to facilitate such students, so that these students may be able to learn in a better way.

It is very important to understand that teachers should have awareness about learning disabilities. They must be trained in a way that allows them to identify students suffering from a particular learning disorder. They should know appropriate strategies to help disabled students and handle their disability, so these students may have equal access to the whole range of learning experiences. However, in Pakistan, there is a lack of appropriate awareness in teachers about learning disabilities. Moreover, there is also no proper professional training or guideline provided to them to understand the disabled students. Children showing symptoms of learning disabilities are usually ignored without any diagnosis and they are commonly tagged as dull students by their teachers and families. No one is ready to pay any extra attention to them or even ask them the reason behind their dullness in learning. This study is aimed at highlighting the fact that teachers are unaware of learning disabilities due to which they are unable to facilitate the disabled students in an encouraging and productive manner. This research emphasizes the need of proper training for teachers regarding learning disabilities in order to make them better equipped to facilitate slow learners.

2. Literature Review

As per Riddick (1995), “A child is said to have learning disabilities if he/she matches the signs, given by the experts and their definitions”. According to Bardley (2002), there are three evidences of early signs of a learning disability. He described them as constant features, precursors and concomitants. In constant features, it is considered that language control problems persist from 4-17 years of age. In such problems, the affected child might show disturbance in phonological processing

and storing. Precursors include the family history and childhood symptoms of the disorder at any given age. In concomitants, orthographical abilities, memory and the child's interest are included.

According to the literature, the word Dyslexia can be broken down into “dys” and “lexia”, which means broke or distorted words in reading and writing. The students suffering from Dyslexia have difficulty in reading, writing, recognizing alphabets and spellings. They commonly confuse alphabets with each other and can hardly remember the sequence of alphabets in a word.

Dysgraphia is the learning disability which hinders the writing and the written expression of the learner. Barkley (1998) said, “Handwriting is one of the basic academic skills in which learning disabled children are impaired and spelling errors are also common in these children”. According to the LDA of California (2002), “A Language Processing Disorder (LPD) relates only to the processing of language. LPD can affect expressive language (what you say) and/or receptive language”. Professor Rosemary Tannock described ADHD in the following words, “ADHD is characterized by persistent, cross-situational, developmentally inappropriate and impairing levels of inattentive, impulsive and hyperactive behavior”. Linguists say that ADHD is a major health concern for learners because it is getting common in children and adults across cultures, frequently recurs and has detrimental effects on the learner's educational and social life.

3. Research Methodology

This study was conducted using the mixed methods approach. This approach includes the characteristics of both the qualitative and quantitative approaches (Bryman, 1998). This research is cross-sectional in nature. It was conducted at four elite primary schools of Lahore and the population comprised 50 English language teachers, 40 primary students, 5 members of administrative staff and 5 diagnosed students suffering from various learning disabilities. The schools were selected randomly from the list of elite primary schools situated in Lahore and the research was conducted with the permission of school principals and the cooperation of the respective class teachers. The tools for collecting data for this research report included questionnaire surveys. Four different questionnaires were designed for the purpose of gathering data (Bryman, 2004). The questionnaire survey that was designed for students was structured, consisting of close-ended questions. Whereas the questionnaires designed for teachers, administration and diagnosed students suffering from one or more learning disabilities were semi-structured in nature, consisting of both open-ended and close-ended questions (Campbell, Stanley & Gage, 1996).

3.1. Limitations

The limitations of the study included the fact that the teachers were standing in the class while the students were filling the questionnaires, so there is a possibility that the responses of the students were biased. Due to security reasons, few schools could be approached for the survey. Moreover, teachers were not willing to give details about their professional training and the strategies they used in the class to handle slow learners. So, some of them returned incomplete forms. Lastly, the patients were hesitant in filling up the questionnaire regarding learning disabilities and sharing their personal experiences.

3.2. Data Representation

3.2.1. Teacher's questionnaire survey. Q: Did you ever notice your students having any of the following problems?

- i) Opening correct page numbers iii) Poor written expression
 ii) Following your instructions iv) Confusing alphabets and making spelling mistakes

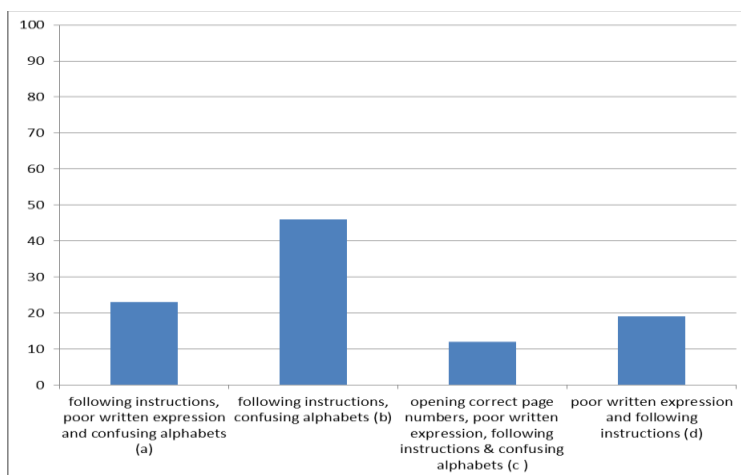


Figure 1. Teacher's questionnaire survey

Analyzing the collected responses, 23% of teachers said that their students had problems in following their instructions, had a poor written expression and confused alphabets. 46% of them said that their students had problems in following their instructions and confused alphabets. 12% said that the students had problems in opening correct page numbers and following instructions, had a poor written expression and confused alphabets. 19% said that their students had problems due to a poor written expression and in following instructions.

3.2.2. Students' questionnaire survey. Q: Does your teacher scold you when you don't understand your classwork?

i) Yes ii) No

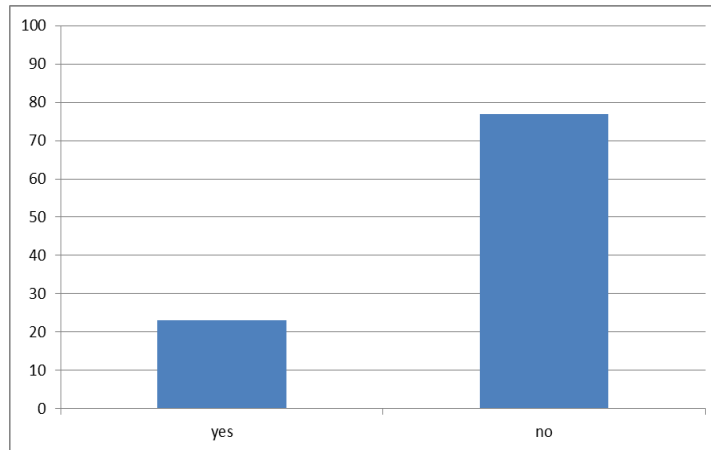


Figure 2. Students' questionnaire survey

The collected data shows that 23% of students said that their teacher scolded them for not understanding their classwork.

3.2.3. Administration's questionnaire survey. Q: Does your admission criteria include any type of diagnostic procedure or reports of the medical history of the child to see if s/he is suffering from a learning disability or not?

i) Yes ii) No

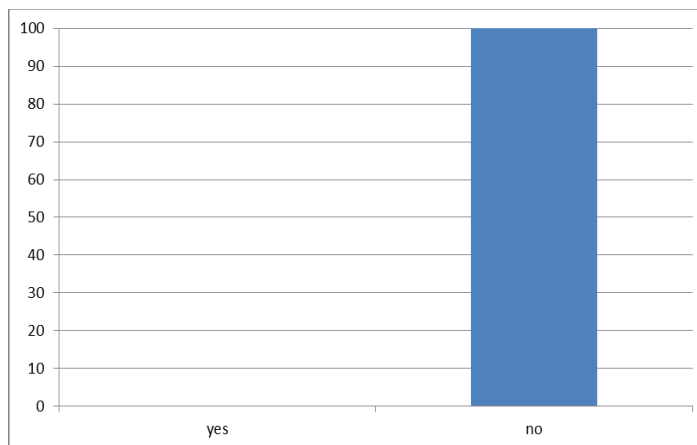


Figure 3. Administration's questionnaire survey

None of the schools included any type of diagnostic procedure or reports of the medical history of the child in their admission criteria to determine if s/he is suffering from a learning disability or not.

3.2.4. Diagnosed students' questionnaire survey. Q: Did your teacher give you some extra individual attention?

i) Yes ii) No

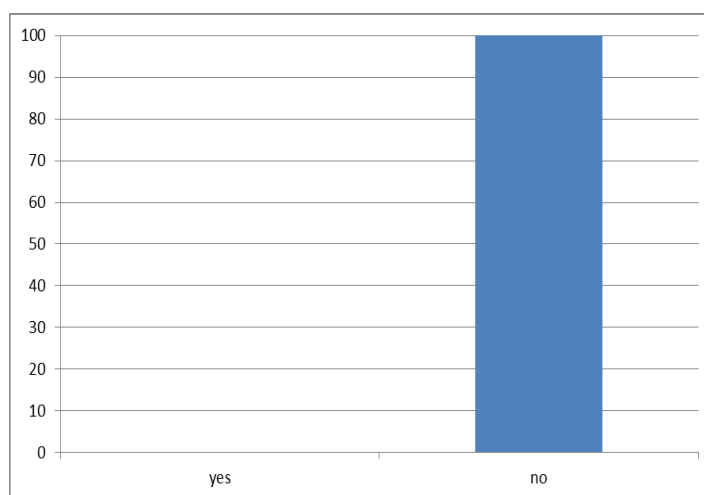


Figure 4. Diagnosed students' questionnaire survey

None of them were ever given any extra attention by their teachers.

4. Discussion

The learning disabilities most commonly highlighted concerning the acquisition of English language include Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, ADHD and Language Processing Disorder (Erlbaum, 1990). Most of the respondents including the primary school teachers and administration were generally aware of the existence of learning disabilities. However, only a few of them were able to identify the listed types of learning disabilities, that is, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, ADHD and Language Processing Disorder

Another observation that can be drawn from the received responses is that it made no difference if the teachers knew about learning disabilities or not, since all of them did have students who faced common problems that showed some sort of learning disorder prevailing among them. Thus, the results bring to light two important facts. The first is the existence of slow learners in a common classroom, that is, students suffering from a particular learning disability. The second is that

the majority of teachers did encounter a slow learner irrespective of the fact that either they knew about learning disabilities or not. Thus, the presence of slow learners in a regular classroom is a common phenomenon and teachers must be given awareness regarding learning disabilities to ensure the fact that slow learners are being facilitated and not discouraged. Linguists, while describing the characteristics of a learning disability say that it is not the state of disability or dysfunction of mind due to which we can categorize the learner as mentally retarded. Indeed, the majority of teachers and administrative staff agreed with it. Most of the teachers were of the view that students who suffer from learning disabilities are not mentally retarded and should not be placed in special schools (Henry, Paul & Rick, [1993](#)). Hence, it shows that they readily accepted slow learners as a part of a regular ESL classroom and believed that there is no difference between them and regular students. However, it was due to their lack of knowledge about learning disabilities that they failed to facilitate such students successfully. They didn't know the effective strategies to use while dealing with slow learners.

All patients unanimously agreed to the fact that neither were they given any extra attention, nor were they ever asked about their problems. The experiences of the patients further enlightened the fact that they were demotivated to study and were made to believe that they were dull just because the teacher was unable to pay them the desired attention. The teacher was unable to attend to their needs and diagnose them, that they might be suffering from a particular learning disability, because the teacher was unaware of it himself / herself (James & Timothy, [2012](#)).

The responses of teachers to the question regarding their teacher training made it evident that most teachers did not receive any type of professional training before they started teaching. Moreover, even among those who did receive teacher training, the majority stated that they were not introduced to the phenomenon of learning disability (Lyon, [1996](#)). They were not told any strategies to handle slow learners and this is why they mostly failed to help them. Thus, the data revealed that the majority of teachers was unaware about learning disabilities because either they did not receive any prior training or even if they did receive it, it created no awareness among them about learning disabilities, their prevalence, symptoms, types and strategies to encounter them.

The teachers, administrative staff and patients did suggest some useful strategies that should be opted to facilitate slow learners without disrupting the classroom environment (Padget, [1998](#)). These suggestions included being polite to such students, encouraging them, giving them individual attention, repeating the lesson and changing the commonly used teaching methodologies.

5. Conclusion

This research focused on the importance of creating awareness in ESL teachers about learning disabilities. Learning disorders limit the ability of a learner to process and produce language, that is, listen, speak, read and write language. Some of the most common types of learning disabilities found in primary school students include Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, ADHD and LPD. Lack of awareness in teachers about learning disabilities is either due to the reason that they did not receive any kind of professional training or their training did not impart any knowledge about learning disabilities. It is due to the lack of professional training for teachers that disabled students have to go through a demotivating learning experience. The discouraging experiences make them feel bad about themselves and also cause them to lose interest in the process of language acquisition. In the worst cases of demotivation, they may deliberately give up learning. Thus, it is very important that teachers are trained and have awareness about learning disabilities. A trained teacher would be able to identify disabled students and handle them more effectively.

5.1. Recommendations

The following recommendations are given on the basis of the current study:

1. There should be an on-campus psychiatrist available to diagnose the disabled students and counsel them.
2. The admission criteria of primary schools should include a diagnostic test to identify if the child is suffering from any type of learning disability. This will help teachers by letting them know beforehand that the child has a learning disorder and will consequently allow them to accommodate the child in an appropriate manner.
3. There should be frequent parent teacher meetings to discuss the performance of the child and any related issues.
4. The ESL teacher selecting criteria must keep in view the fact that the teacher should have a degree or diploma in ELT.

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